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ABSTRACT

When teachers claim that the idea of community serves as the inspiration for a writing course, the question of what exactly is meant by the term community is compelling. The idea of community has any number of interpretations, ranging from the idealistically inspired to the downright deranged. In the new Honors Program at Ohio State University at Lima, a course in composition and literature was taught which focused on utopias and dystopias. The objective was to read as many classic utopian/dystopian texts as possible in a 10-week course and ponder the motives behind utopian and dystopian impulses as well as how these terms can be applied to students' experiences. The location of the university, suffering from the common crises of the midwestern "Rust Belt," can hardly be conceived of as a utopia or ideal community. Students were challenged to read in a way so as to participate actively in producing the meaning of the text. Students were then asked to compose their own extended narratives describing either an utopia or a dystopia. The results of this assignment were mixed and incomplete, but nevertheless gratifying, entertaining, and in some cases, impressive. A sense of ambiguity and ambivalence concerning human communities, relationships, and especially about utopia and dystopia pervades all of the more thoughtful narratives by the students. Moreover, the assignment encouraged students to interact more dynamically with themselves and the communities in which they live. (HB)

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*Utopia, Limited: Narratives from
a Writer's Workshop*

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The title of this paper, as the more venerable among us today will recognize, has been brazenly lifted from one of the last of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. It is a piece whose librettist, a "Eurocentric" author if ever there was one, whimsically expressed his reservations about Western--specifically British--culture as a useful model for other societies in the world community, particularly those entities we now refer to as "Emerging" or "Third World" countries, but which a century ago, when Gilbert was writing his political satire, enjoyed the status of colonies, and, somewhat later, the more dubiously exalted term "client nations".

I mention this not so much as a literary footnote, although one needs to give credit where credit is due, but rather to introduce the central theme, not just of this paper, but of the writing course which served as the inspiration for it, which is the idea of community. Even in the Age of Empire, the age not just of William Schwenck Gilbert (who was, after all, barely even a bit player) or Rudyard Kipling, but also the age of Benjamin Disraeli and Teddy Roosevelt, of Cecil Rhodes and Leland Stanford, Junior, of Horatio Herbert Kitchener and George Armstrong Custer, all manner of people, from all nations and all walks of life, conceived of and desired a world community. The questions, of course, were, what manner of world community, and on whose terms? By strict definition, I suppose that an empire, even an evil empire, is still a community of sorts. Most of its citizens are miserable, possibly even mutinous, but a few are having the time of their lives.

What, exactly, is a community? What constitutes it? Who belongs to it and who doesn't? Who make up its "In-Groups" and its "Out-Groups"? Is "Community" the same as "Society"? Is this merely a string of rhetorical questions?

To a point--and I hope only to a point--it is. I would venture, by way of a general response to all of them, that there are countless answers to these questions, that the idea of community has any number of interpreters, and that these interpretations range from the idealistically inspired to the practical to the unpalatable to the downright deranged. We all live not only in a Community, but in a myriad of communities, some of them by choice, many

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of them merely by circumstance. Consider, for a moment, the late Philip Larkin's poem "Days":

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields. ¹

If we paraphrase Larkin's poem, we might generalize that communities are also where we live, and that, in at least in their ideal form, they are places to be happy in. And, ultimately, where can we live but in communities? Even the most resolute survivalist, like T. Coraghessan Boyle's Bayard Wemp, holed up in a custom-made bunker in the wilds of Montana, has merely traded one community for another, one form of fretful paranoia for something even more pathetic. Those who flee across the oceans, wrote Horace in one of his epistles, may change the heavens, but not their souls. The Moon may now hang in an exotic corner of the sky, but you're still an ax-murderer: you can't run away from your troubles. You can't resign from the homeowner's association, leave the church, or cancel your registration with the Book-of-the-Month Club. You can't escape humanity, either theirs or yours.

I mentioned ideal communities a moment ago, and that is where the main focus of my paper lies, in the responses several of my students made to texts which presented community in both its best and worst manifestations. As a component of a new Honors Program at our regional campus of The Ohio State University, I taught a course in composition and literature which focused on utopias and dystopias. Each year the Honors Program offers a three-quarter sequence of courses in various disciplines under a general theme, and this past year's rubric was "The World Community". A course in utopias and dystopias seemed an intriguing way to approach this issue in a course that combined expository writing with the analysis of literary texts.

¹ Philip Larkin. *The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber & Faber, 1964, p. 27.

I hoped to do two things in this ten-week course. I wanted to expose my students to as many of the "classic" utopian/dystopian texts as possible--a hefty, actually unmanageable reading list given the time-frame of the quarter system--that ran from Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* (selections only), through *The Tempest*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, and concluding with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The list is, of course, limited and perhaps somewhat predictable. Nevertheless, I was teaching a course for first-year students, most of whom were unfamiliar even with such traditional texts as *1984* and *Brave New World*. I wanted them to have some sense of a "canon" of this genre of literature, however limited, as they began to address the issues raised by the works within that canon.

What I really wanted to do in this course was to encourage my students to transcend, if not the works themselves (who can transcend *The Tempest*?), then at least the ideological weight that imposes itself upon the terms "utopian" and "dystopian", rendering them an impossible cargo, circling endlessly on the baggage carousel of genre, while we watch helplessly and idiotically, lacking either a claim ticket or a key.

What I asked students to try to do during the course was to rethink the implications of the term "utopia"--drawn by Sir Thomas More for his famous treatise from the Greek, an ambiguous coinage that can read either as *eutopia*, not a place, or *eutopia*, a good place--in the context of what they perceived about the idea of a community, or a group of communities, specifically those in which they participated, both willingly or as a matter of course. In other words, rather than taking utopian or dystopian simply to refer to either an impossible ideal or a grisly if plausible nightmare, I wanted them to apply these terms as closely as possible to their own experience, and to ponder the motives behind utopian and dystopian impulses.

The campus where I teach is located in a medium-sized community (population around 45,000), somewhere in that part of the nation bearing that sad yet apt epithet "The Rustbelt". The local unemployment rate tops 9%. The local economy relies upon a combination of heavy industry (now practically moribund), service industries, and agriculture. The region's largest employer is a foreign-owned petroleum and chemicals refinery. A plant which produces tanks--some of which were used in the late Persian Gulf War, by the Iraqis as well as by us--is gradually being phased out.

Racial diversity is mixed, but not too greatly. In the outlying communities there are Latinos, working the farms or in small businesses. In the main city in this area there is a small Asian community. There is also a sizeable African-American population (around 40%), recruited originally to work in the now-defunct factories, now largely unemployed and prey to many of the urban ravages of poverty, drugs, and crime. Relatively few young people from that community attend our campus or go to universities elsewhere in the state.

There is no Planned-Parenthood clinic in our community. Women seeking advice and assistance with regard to birth control are obliged to go elsewhere in the state. There few shelters for the victims of spousal and parental abuse, although the need for such places is as great there as it is anywhere else.

I can conceive of few who would call this community a utopia, much less an ideal community. Who is happy in this place? Some must be, but many are not. To be sure, there are a number of smaller communities--farm towns, mostly, ringing the larger city where the campus is located--and some of these look idyllic enough to the eye, pastoral and warmly Rockwellian, while others testify to the grim reality of rural poverty.

These are the places my students come from, what we might call their "initial" communities. Of course, they belong to many more communities, both large and small--families (both nuclear and extended), friends, neighborhoods, educational, religious and social groups. The list could go on, but obviously you catch my drift. Many of my students are first-generation college students, and a fair percentage of these fall into the category we now designate as "non-traditional". For these students, a college campus constitutes a whole new array of possible communities. Out of all of this cacaphony, this Babel of voices and gestures, I wanted them to read and write about utopias and dystopias: not just the "canonical" ones, but their own as well.

That, of course, was *my* utopian ideal, and as you know, college classrooms are not perfect societies. Moreover, I am a far cry from Plato's Philosopher Ruler. As I mentioned above, the reading list was ambitiously long--too long, in fact, for a ten-week course. So despite the best of intentions, several of the works under consideration got shorter shrift than they merit. I did try to encourage a course of reading that focused on the human condition as it arose in each of the texts, and that examined the plight of various

constituencies depicted therein. As Marleen Barr and Nicholas D. Smith note in the preface to their *Women and Utopia*,

[f]or a fictive vision to qualify as utopian, it must at least apply to, if not directly concern itself with, the institutions and interactions of persons.²

It is easy enough, after all, to conclude that a utopian society is not possible on this planet, certainly on a large scale. And it becomes quickly obvious that someone's utopia is another's dystopia: if Prospero is content on his enchanted island, Ariel, Caliban, and Miranda are not. And, lest we forget, Hermann Goering thought Nazi Germany was a terrific place.

These were some of the obvious issues we found in the texts. We also, inevitably, found that utopias were rather less interesting to read about than dystopias--1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale* were more popular than, say, *The Republic* or *Looking Backward*--and the utopias themselves often sounded less palatable than perhaps their authors intended, for reasons I have hinted at above.

Aside from these fairly universal conclusions, what I wanted my students to do with the texts under consideration was something a bit more challenging than acquiring a haphazard Michelin Guide of eccentric places during a ten-week tour of the literary outlands. I hoped that they would engage the texts in the way described by Peter Ruppert in his study of utopias, *Reader in a Strange Land*:

Literary utopias [he writes] emphasize the reader's role as an active producer of meaning: they invite us to enter into a dialogue with the text and formulate a meaning that may not be explicit in the text, but which grows out of the interplay between social fact and utopian dream. ³

We should read these texts, he says, in a way that challenges us, and requires our "active participation and intervention in producing the meaning of the text."⁴

² Marleen Barr and Nicholas D. Smith, eds. *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*. New York: University Press of America, 1983, p. 1.

³ Peter Ruppert. *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986, p. 6.

⁴ Ruppert, p.13.

This too is utopian, or at least idealistic in its scope and intent. To be frank, or at least practical, my students could certainly intervene in the texts of Plato and Shakespeare and Huxley and Gilman to discover a personal relevance but only with limited confidence (Utopia, Limited). But I think that confidence did increase over the quarter. In this writing course, I wanted them to fuse both their experiences and perceptions in their reading and their writing. In addition to three formal essays and a reader's journal, I asked during the fourth week of the quarter that they begin planning and writing a utopia or a dystopia of their own, either derived from (or inspired by) the assigned texts, or from other, original sources: ideally, their own experience and imagination, their own insights into the various communities in which they participated.

This assignment was to be in the form of an extended narrative, although the particular format was left to the writer's discretion: it might take the form of a parody or imitation of someone like Swift or Samuel Butler, possibly a continuation of the works that we read by those writers (for example, a Fifth Part of *Gulliver*). It might also be written in the form of a diary or journal, or a futuristic encyclopedia article, a short novel. Topics, situations, and scenarios were also open to choice. I was hoping, of course, that student originality would predominate, and by and large it did. Since I was, at least nominally, the Philosopher Ruler, and wanted to appear benign and helpful, I suggested certain possibilities: these included, a series of "what-if" scenarios: what if, for example, the Confederacy had not been defeated in 1865, and that two separate but irrevocably interdependent nations had been obliged to coexist for over a century? The implications of that situation radiate, it seems to me, almost beyond comprehension: it involves questioning the status of race relations, as well as the role that the United States (not to mention our neighbor to the South) would play in the world community. Or, what if our campus, which is a commuter campus, suddenly took it upon itself to become the sort of cloistered scholastic community one associates with the European Middle Ages? How would the majority of students, who must divide their time between the secular treadmill of full-time enrollment and full-time jobs, adapt to such a reclusive and ascetic life?

And so on. For the remainder of the quarter students wrote weekly installments, imagining and then writing--sometimes drawing--scenarios, geography, history, technology, whatever would establish not merely the

infrastructure, but also the human contours of their utopia or dystopia. Students workshopped their utopias-in-progress, and discussed it with me during tutorial conferences. At the end of the course they submitted a sustained narrative, between ten and twenty typed pages, along with a brief self-commentary on the narrative: what they had hoped to accomplish in writing the narrative; what part the assigned texts had played, if any; how the communities they belonged to in their "real life" had influenced the narrative, or how the reading as well as the writing had caused them to reassess any of those communities and their own involvement in them (certainly not in a negative way, especially, though hopefully with a greater sense of self-identity).

The inevitable results were of course mixed and incomplete, but nevertheless gratifying, entertaining, and, in many cases, impressive. If only I had allowed more time--allowing them to begin their narrative from Week One rather than Week Four. Perhaps even that would not have been enough world and time, since I was, after all, asking them to remake the world in an unusually thoughtful and precarious manner. Some of the narratives struck me as youthful escapism, good-natured, but improbable--in one account, Gulliver is cured of his misanthropy by the love of a good Amazon (that account from a woman in the course), and in another, a college freshman stumbles upon an extension of Plato's Academy (coeducational), thriving, however incongruously, in the Florida Everglades, and decides that northwestern Ohio is not the utopia he had hitherto imagined it to be. A new spin on Spring Break. Yet another imagined a surreal dystopia, inspired in part by a Gary Larson cartoon, a violent and absurd place ruled over by crash dummies.

But in addition to these versions, as diverting as they were, I read others that were thoughtful and compelling: one student (she is white) imagined what it would be like as a young black woman living in a 1990s Confederate States of America, a nation where slavery has been abolished only in name, and trying to escape North (an odyssey in the tradition of *Black Like Me*), only to discover that bigotry is not contained within geographical boundaries. Not surprisingly, a number of writers expressed concern over the hegemony that technology seems to have achieved over humanity (drawn not just from *Brave New World* and *1984*, but from personal experience as well, up to and including confronting personal computers for the first time). At least one writer

imagined the rust-belt community I described a few minutes ago as it might be a century from now, free from the urban ills that now beset it, but at the expense of an all-powerful police force (the present-day police force is, to all accounts, understaffed). The narrator of this account is the "grand-daughter" of the student who actually wrote it for my course. She is appalled at the barbaric conditions under which her grandmother was forced to exist (the writer herself has made it clear that she enjoys a comfortable and secure middle-class existence). What emerges, quite subtly, is an edgy commentary upon life in the city, as well as attempt to weigh the ills against the cures required to eradicate them. A number of other students celebrated the village, the small town, a vanishing locality, which, if rather soporific to some of us, was for them the last possible utopia. We should not regard this as surprising. The proverbial belief that "God made the country, and man made the town", to use Cowper's phrase, persists to this day, and this complicates, if it does not quite undermine, any belief in a utopia. Utopia is, after all, a human construct, and therefore inevitably urban, and therefore inevitably corrupt and doomed. A utopia is merely a dystopia in its youth. Several of my students expressed this notion with great feeling.

Finally, there were the surprises, not for me but for the students themselves. Here is a portion of one student's self-commentary after she had finished and submitted her narrative:

I think that this paper reflects a lot of what I have learned in my classes this quarter (especially English and Sociology). . . . I was going to write a utopia, but it was too boring. Perhaps I wrote this to prove to myself that women can be just as evil as men can. You see, I can be a pretty serious male-basher when I want to be. Maybe I'm realizing how wrong that is.

Another student, a woman who had described a series of small countries which resolve territorial hostilities by means of an elaborate but non-lethal war-game, commented on an unexpected romance between two warriors from opposing nations:

[s]omething I did not point out in my paper was that the narrator was female. This means that the relationship between her and Liz was a homosexual one. I didn't make an issue of this because it would not be a big deal in that society (unless they were from different territories, which they were).

This sense of ambiguity about human relationships, about community, about utopia and dystopia is perhaps most evident in that passage, but such

ambivalence pervades all of the more thoughtful narratives my students wrote. This is fine--I am not in the business of deconstruction, but what I observed my students doing wasn't deconstruction either. It was something more basic and useful. It demanded, on the one hand, *revision* in its most traditional sense, scrutinizing the familiar in a new light, yet questioning the unfamiliar in the context of cherished values. On the other hand, writing their own utopia or dystopia took them beyond the comfortable frontiers of their ordinary reading and writing. In the best sense of what Peter Ruppert proposes, it encouraged them to interact more dynamically, not only with the texts, but with themselves and the communities in which they live, and which ultimately depend upon them for their sustenance. Gilbert was right: Utopia, if it exists, is only a limited concern, fragile and tenuous, undermined by all the natural shocks that flesh is heir to. But ultimately it *is* a real place, as real as Prospero's Isle, as Winston Smith's Oceania, as Offred's Gilead, real because it abuts and sometimes invades our everyday lives; it is a republic permanently fixed in the recesses of our imagination, and to that end it will remain always a possibility, a scenario, a crazy scheme to be reread and rewritten.

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